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Iconography of violence in televised Hinduism: the politics of images in the *Mahabharata*

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ABSTRACT

Violence and the representation of it in various forms of media have remained an intriguing subject of research particularly since violence occupies some key discursive spaces in the larger realm of media images. It is also often argued that the media promotes violence through repeated use of visuals representing, for example, physical combat or stealth, especially by the way of television programmes such as soap operas and mythological television series, which depict violence inherent in their narratives. The portrayal of violence in the televised version of mythological epics remains of primary concern for two specific reasons. First, epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* remain points of reference for everyday teaching and instruction even at the level of the household in India. Second, forms of individual and collective violence represented in the narratives, which include fratricide, attempted murder, molestation and kidnapping, emerge as the pivots on which the epics develop, categorizing them as fantastical tales of violence spawning more violence and bloodshed. The history of Indian television is beset with both the epics having been transformed into well-mounted television extravaganzas, beamed into households every week or weekday. Epic stories such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have been popular choices among television moguls attempting a portrayal of Hindu mythology through iconography and representation. As such, bringing alive on screen inherent tales of violence emerges as one of the foremost objectives of those behind the televisual epics, at the same time justifying such depictions of violence as necessary for the ultimate common good. Often these descriptions or representations of violence through the narrative of the epics appear to be exaggerated as visual images of violence magnify the impact of the scenario in question. The paper envisages an investigation into the several forms of violence depicted through the epics and the manner in which these instances of graphic violence are mounted as central to the progression of the narrative of the television series. Further, it would base its central arguments on the political narrative of televised versions of the *Mahabharata* envisioning the inherent violence in several of its themes. Engaging with violence to further its thematic background – the moral necessity of the victory of good over evil and the creation of a just society – remains the centrepiece of the argument even as the paper would attempt to argue that televised versions of the *Mahabharata* have repeatedly and continually glorified violence and attempted to establish binaries between justifiable and unjustifiable violence.

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The article is based on analysis of *Mahabharat*, produced by Siddharth Kumar Tewary, telecast on Star Plus and Star Plus HD from September 2013 to July 2014 and *Mahabharat*, produced by B R Chopra, 1988–1989.

Introduction

Interest in the impact of televised violence has spawned several strands of theorization, particular among them being the social learning theory, which claims that children (and young adults) learn aggression by being exposed to excessive violence on television (Comstock and Scharrer 2003, 205). On the other hand, the catalyst model posits that media violence is a secondary and weak causal influence on the viewers, mainly children (Ferguson and Kilburn 2009, 759). The advent of Hindu mythological dramas on television, with violence being justified as the harbinger of the ultimate good – establishment of the rule of law – could be located somewhere between the two theoretical strands. Rajagopal (2001) writes about the inoculation of Hindutva into the body politic of India coinciding with the launching of Ramanand Sagar's *magnum opus Ramayana* (1987–1989). The average number of viewers for each episode is believed to have been about 40–60 million (despite the presence of just 13.2 million television sets in the country and limited electricity), with the most popular episodes possibly drawing as many as 80–100 million viewers. The imagery of the warrior Rama, as opposed to the image of Rama as a just ruler that governs the popular belief in the *maryada purushottam* (the ideal man), further signified the facades of the *ratha* or chariot that became the symbol of militant Hinduism in the early 1990s (Davis 2007). Both developments led to incidents of Hindu–Muslim violence. The iconography of violence in *Ramayana*, therefore, emerges as the central theme of research, particularly in view of the manner in which the imagination of Hindu deities like Rama has transformed, turning into images of aggressive individuals seeking revenge and retribution.

The Bharatiya Janata Party or the BJP, currently holding the reigns of political power in India, counts among its key agenda points the need for a cultural reawakening of the Hindu majority. From its focus on the movement for a Ram Mandir (temple) at Ayodhya, historically designated as Rama's birthplace in order to consolidate its upper caste, Hindu vote share to its more recent gravitation towards the rhetoric of development, which catapulted the party to power at the Centre, the BJP has benefitted in more ways than one from an easily pliant media. Much like the umbrella organization – the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh or the RSS – which along with the BJP, its political face and several other Hindutva outfits like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal make up what is popularly known as the Sangh Parivar, the advantage of the televisual aid through representation and media messaging has contributed to building the fortunes of the BJP as well.

Farmer (2007, 98) explores the ways in which mass media have been implicated in the propagation and furthering of communalism, focussing on media imagery surrounding the destruction of the Babri Masjid. She takes recourse to specificity, language, and causality to construct her thesis on the changing portrayal of Hindu icons and symbols, such as Rama on state television to coincide with the exceedingly militant and militaristic image pronounced by the Sangh Parivar around the mobilization for the Ramjanmabhoomi movement leading to the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya. Farmer also argues that the cooption of the Sanskritized form of Hindi, as against the commonly spoken Hindustani, used on state television was a deliberate attempt to divide the Hindu and Muslim cultural legacies into two distinct halves. The adoption and amalgamation of the Rama imagery by the Sangh Parivar to further their political aims points towards a dual role that the telecast of the primary Hindu epic, *Ramayana* played, the ostensible one being the serialized depiction of the mythological story of Rama.

John Zavos, Pralay Kanungo, Deepa S Reddy, Maya Warrier and Raymond Brady Williams (2012) have elucidated the conception of 'public Hinduism', which has always been provided support by the mass media, particularly television entertainment, with India's state-owned Doordarshan playing the role of the progenitor. If the response of the viewers to the appearance of Rama on television is observed – garlanding the television set to burning incense sticks at the time of the broadcast – it would not be presumptuous to conclude that the telecast of the *Ramayana* acted as a catalyst for taking Hinduism from the *puja* rooms of the religious Indian society to the public domain. As homogenous empty time was clocked for the telecast of the epic story, state-promoted religion made its way into popular imagination. Much akin to the birth of nationalism in the post-Enlightenment period through the growth of print and the spread of newspapers in Europe, the collective, homogenous viewing of televised epics could

be placed on a comparative plank. Rajagopal (2004), however argues that the Sangh Parivar mistook a technological phenomenon for a political one. Television broadcast is one-way communication, whereas politics is an example of two- way communication. But the Parivar turned the tide to their favour by appropriating the impact of the broadcast to argue that Hindu consolidation had started taking shape.

Taking the cause of homogenous empty time further is Mazzarella (2013) who frames the concept of 'mass' through the element of anonymity that characterizes any public communication in the age of mass publics; the sense that what makes a communication public is not just that 'it addresses me' by way of a public channel, but also that 'it addresses me insofar as it also, and by the same token, addresses unknown others'. Attempting therefore to direct public discourse towards a certain end becomes an activity with which political dispensations such as the Sangh Parivar engage with regularity. Even though the broadcast of *Ramayana* was approved by a Congress government, the BJP claimed the spoils of victory by reusing representative images from the televised epic for its Ram Temple movement. The argument is also predicated on Durkheim's ([1912] 2008) classic analysis of ritual as the basic foundation of social order. For societies organized by totemic orders of classifications, one of the functions of ritual is to integrate sensuous excitement with symbolic order. Televised rendering of Hindu religious epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* thus aspire to quintessentially establish symbolic order through relayed media messages, creating a platform for political motifs to take hold and proliferate.

Televised Hinduism: a brief history

Television in India and its impact on nationalist politics, particularly Hindu nationalism and its political overtones remains one of the most compelling issues of research exploration for students and scholars of media and politics. Since the advent of television in India – the number of licensed television sets in India grew from 55 in 1964 to 100,000 in 1975 and to just over 2 million connections in 1982; in 1991 a total of 34 million families owned television sets, growing to 65% of the Indian population owning television sets by 2014 – the societal and political landscape has transformed quite dramatically (Mehta 2015). As India changed, the implications of the spread of television, be it the number of channels, content and quality of programming, or the technological revolution that set in motion the introduction of satellite television, began to herald new insights into a radically charged, transient society. The fact that television touches the lives of almost every Indian makes it a medium that is both revolutionary in nature and sublime in character.

Punathambekar and Kumar (2013), in their volume titled *Television at Large in South Asia* emphasized on television's remediation of the public/private distinction in the South Asian context that lies at the heart of the understanding of how television stages the modern in the postcolonial context in particular, and television's impact on the modern world in general. Mehta (2008) wrote about satellite television being not only a marker of the progress of the idea of India, but also being a fundamental contributor to it in *Television in India*. In 2015, he makes giant strides into the heart of the matter and forwards a few seminal arguments about the rise, consolidation and the inimical nature of television programming in a largely middle-class, upwardly mobile society aspiring to jump cut into the league of developed nations.

Television programming in India began as an experiment in 1959 where educational and instructional programmes were beamed into homes for 2 h every day targeted mainly at students and farmers. By the 1970s, television broadcast centres were established in several parts of the country, and in 1976, Doordarshan, till then the television arm of the All India Radio, became a separate department. Following the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1975–76, television sets were distributed to selected villages where programming included messages on farming patterns, monsoon forecasts and family planning, besides folk forms of art, drama, dance and music. The live telecast of the Ninth Asian Games in 1982 in colour mode was a major milestone in the history of Indian television which led to a number of new transmitters being set up across India. Programming included a number of syndicated shows from abroad as the concept of television as a medium of entertainment began to gain centre stage. It is in this scenario that the central government, until now having upheld the dictum of keeping

equidistance from all forms of religious programming, approved the broadcast of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana*.

Just after the dawn of Independence, a more Sanskritized form of Hindi had been officially adopted as the *lingua franca* of all radio broadcasts in order to simply distinguish between the Hindustani which the general masses made use of in North India and the purer form of Hindi which the nascent state deemed to impose. The telecast of a purely Hindu religious epic in the form of *Ramayana* could be explained as an extension of the state's rather skewed idea of making available 'cultural' content on government-run television for the consumption of the mass audience. B R Chopra's *Mahabharata*, arguably a grander, more magnificent televised retelling of Vyasa's tumultuous epic followed *Ramayana* into Indian television lore. Two significant attempts have subsequently been made to replicate its success – in 2008 by Ekta Kapoor(9X) and 2013 by Siddharth Kumar Tewary (Star Plus).

Television viewing in India changed dramatically in the 1990s when privately owned satellite channels made their way into living rooms. What began with images of the Gulf War being broadcast by the American television giant CNN in India culminated in the birth of India's first satellite channel – Zee TV – a collaborative effort between Hong Kong-based STAR TV and an Indian business conglomerate. By 1995, several private channels which included regional language channels were ruling airtime and the monopolistic dominance of Doordarshan on the cultural sphere was gradually beginning to wane. Buoyed by the response received by the broadcast of mythological epics on state television, satellite channels began to focus on programming that promoted Hindu traditions, values and culture making the undivided Hindu family a symbol of nationalistic fervour. In due course, television producers have continuously tapped the insatiable appetite of the Indian mass audience to follow and accept clichéd, stereotypical and sometimes deeply flawed content in the form of daily soap operas, mythological epics, celebrity game shows and other entertainment.

Various forms of violence remain an integral part of the narrative of the epics, be it the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. In the *Mahabharata*, from Duryodhana's repeated attempts at murdering Bheema and the Pandavas to the public molestation of Draupadi, and finally to the great war that led to the annihilation of the Kuru clan, the epic story hinges, as is evident, on several instances of graphic violence brought to life quite vividly on television screens by the visual renderings through the decades.

The exteriorization of violence facilitated by televised renditions of the *Mahabharata* exemplifies the function of the media as a consolidator of social functions of communication and representation, leading to a network of signs and messages, and in turn changing the context of social messages in general. Collective communication occurs at both personal and societal levels simultaneously in circuits that seem to be interlinked. The ideas and images supplied to people and received by them remain part of a circuit of communication wherein collective representation of Hindu legends, myths and epics sustain a crucial space. Such representation could be explained with the help of mythological soap operas such as *Devon ke Dev…Mahadev* (Life OK, 2011), a popular televised retelling of the legend of Shiva, the Destroyer in the Hindu holy trinity, the other foci being Brahma (the Creator) and Vishnu (the Preserver). Garnering television rating points (TRPs) – a measurement used to quantify the popularity of a particular television programme or campaign – in excess of 8.2, the serialized representation of mythologist Devdutt Pattnaik's works has witnessed consistent popularity among satellite television viewers, lending credence to the consolidation of a particular trend in collective representation – the establishment and continuance of a dominant discourse perpetuated and sanctified by the hegemonic cultural ideology. Satellite television in India, therefore, performs an abundantly important function, which may or may not be convenient to the dominant cultural forces – of organizing and maintaining a steady stream of idyllic, malleable cultural messages that could filter down easily to the lowest common denominator, cutting down the responsibilities of self-avowed cultural outfits like the RSS and other such organizations representing the main protagonists in majoritarian Hindu communalism. Their Hindu nationalism or Hindutva is a majoritarian idea that does not espouse communal conflict in principle but promotes Hindu majoritarianism, cultural nationalism and national 'unity in diversity' based on its own definition of India's Hindu cultural heritage. Key to their majoritarian politics remains the play of images and messages being conveyed to the accepting Hindu masses (Ludden 2007). Images and

messages on idealism in Hindu families, Hindu values, particularly with regard to the role of women in a family are beamed into urban drawing rooms and rural households with great alacrity, hence preparing grounds for the easy assimilation of similar messages disseminated by Hindu nationalist organizations such as the RSS.

Rajagopal (2001, 337) observes that Indian media studies has tended to be dominated by an often overly empirical approach, where investigation into audience responses is thought to be capable of arriving at truths about the character of public opinion, of popular beliefs underlying national ideologies and/or of subaltern sentiments whose exclusion can be compensated by a method of enumeration. Such an approach ignores the process of representation as well as the phenomenological specificity inherent to the work of a given media technology. The key objective of this analysis remains a partial or complete uncovering of the representational tropes employed by mythological television series such as the *Mahabharata* in order to assess the portrayal of varied forms of violence inherent in the narrative of the great epic.

With violence and its several forms as its central thesis, the televising of epics particular to a religious denomination on state-run television appears as a secondary argument but gathers importance if viewed against the popularity garnered by the images represented in both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The majoritarian argument notwithstanding, the current analysis focuses on the message – enmeshed in violence – being conveyed to the mass of viewers. Even as we focus on the forms and kinds of violence being depicted on television screens through mythological epics, the agenda setting function of the media emerges onto the forefront.

The argument derives from a careful viewing of the television epics primarily the *Mahabharata*, through both its versions, and seeks to ascertain the ontology of representation of violence on Indian television. The analysis attempts to add to the existing and emerging literature on media studies particularly with regard to television with the core assumption that messages relayed through television screens find greater resonance with the public than the other most popular mass medium – cinema. Violence and its portrayal on television screens, therefore, remains the focus of this examination in order to attempt to clarify the primary function that the media engages in through such representation.

Ahead of any in-depth investigation into televised or textual forms of Hindu mythology, a brief scrutiny of the narrative is warranted. *The Mahabharata* is based on the socio-political thematic of fratricidal rivalry between generations of an accomplished Kshatriya warrior clan. The central narrative is populated by the Pandavas, the sons of Pandu, the ruler of the Kuru clan who ascended the throne of Hastinapur by virtue of his older brother, Dhritarashtra, being born blind. On the other hand of the Kuru spectrum are the Kauravas, the sons of Dhritarashtra who stake a claim to the throne of Hastinapur. Beginning with several instances of sibling rivalry, the enmity between the Pandavas, led by the virtuous Yudhisthira and the Kauravas, Duryodhana being the eldest, culminates in the Great War of attrition fought for the institution of a just society devoid of the vestiges of evil.

Forms of violence in televised *Mahabharata*

Inextricably pertinent to the inquiry into the portrayal of violence in the televised forms of the *Mahabharata* remains the binary distinction between violence perpetrated by the evil Duryodhana and his brothers against the more righteous Pandavas – actions that are interminably assessed as vile and treacherous or *adharma* – as against the violence perpetuated by the Pandavas in retaliation during the Great War guided by the divinely ordained Krishna – deeds described in haloed terms as attuned to the exigencies of establishing 'rule of law' or dharma (good) on earth. The visual representation of such a distinction, however, has remained a difficult terrain for film-makers to achieve. B R Chopra's classic enterprise relied on imagery and iconography to portray dharma against *adharma*. Central to the attempt remains the insistence of the forces behind the television dramas to focus on instigating the viewer to differentiate between 'good' and 'evil' on the basis of attire of the characters. *Mahabharata* (1988–1989) depicted the Pandavas dressed mostly in white-coloured attire thereby equating the colour white with goodness and purity, in other words, dharma. Duryodhana, on the other hand, was represented as

permanently dressed in black robes, while his equally vicious brother, Dushasana generally wore dark blue, depicting the darkness of soul and spirit, in other words, *adharma*.

More recent screen renditions of the epic have witnessed a change in the imagery although the distinction between the colours worn by the protagonists and antagonists remains significant and indicative. The Pandavas are still dressed in lighter shades, with Arjuna representing the valour and glory of the righteous warrior, while their vainglorious cousins – the Kauravas – are depicted as sporting dark hues, although the colour of their robes range from blue to red. The pristineness of the white represents purity, while the dark shades portray pure, unrestrained evil. Such iconography manifests in the appreciation of the viewer of the earthy innocence of the Pandavas pitted against the brute arrogance of the Kauravas. Imagery of this kind does not remain restricted only to the *Mahabharata*. Screenplay writers have often resorted to the ancient Hindu myth of white representing good and black representing evil to create mythological characters on television screens that have dominated the imagination of the viewer. The characters of Shiva and Jalandhara in *Devon ke Dev…Mahadev* (Life OK) were presented in white and black in order to convey the fundamental distinction between evil and its manifestation against good and its portrayal.

The imagination of Kaali (dark-skinned) as the angry and violent twin of the peaceful and demure Parvati or the avenging Durga (fair-skinned) pervades the screen depiction of good (dharma) and evil (*adharma*) wherein anger and violence are seen as deeds of darkness, while the violence practised by Durga against the demon king Mahishasura could be justified as that resorted to in order for good to prevail over evil and hence a necessary condition for the establishment of dharma. The violence represented in mythological television shows such as the *Mahabharata* therefore remains an extension of the imagination of the dark characters against those in white depicting purity of soul and spirit. In these terms then, the violence perpetrated by the Pandavas could be justified as necessary and inevitable for the victory of dharma over *adharma*, which remains the prerogative of the Kauravas, violence practiced by whom could be described as foul and vile.

For an assessment of violence as represented in the televised versions of the *Mahabharata*, it becomes important to delineate the forms of violence portrayed in the narrative of the epic. Since the screenplay of the television series remains bound by the existence of the original story, the events or *prasangas* are dramatized, the recent televised versions being more appropriate for description than B R Chopra's attempt. A descriptive assessment of certain episodes through the course of the narrative of the epic story remains methodologically the most pertinent manner in which forms of violence and their impact could be discerned. The episodes selected for analysis arguably form the *mis-en-scenes* of the *Mahabharata* – key turning points in the narrative structure of the epic and therefore are worthy of mention, description and analysis. In order to arrive at a comprehensive argument about the preponderance of violence in televised versions of the *Mahabharata*, such analysis provides a conclusive platform.

Siddharth Kumar Tewary's adaptation of the *Mahabharata* begins with Goddess Ganga drowning ten of her sons born out of her union with King Shantanu in order for the lineage to decimate, an act of wanton violence best described as infanticide, before being discovered by her husband trying to drown the eleventh child. The child survives to grow into the greatest warrior the world has ever seen, known popularly as Devavrat (later named Bheeshma after his unshakable vow of celibacy) who in a display of sheer brute force and dominance of the kingdom of Hastinapur over other smaller kingships kidnaps three young princesses – Amba, Ambika and Ambalika – for them to marry his half-brothers, Chitrangad and Vichitravirya. Here, both Goddess Ganga and her eleventh born perpetrate acts of violence – Ganga drowning her new-born babies and Bheeshma abducting young women, which are appraised as absolutely mandatory to the preponderance of dharma and hence justified. Further, the iconography of both Goddess Ganga and her son Bheeshma are signified by the whiteness of their robes as parallels are drawn between the attire and the purity of intention.

Subsequent to the deaths of both princes their wives, left childless by the sudden demise of their husbands, are subjected to copulation with the great sage Ved Vyasa, the progenitor of the Vedic epic under scrutiny. Representation of this event in televised versions of the *Mahabharata* could be looked at closely for the violence inherent in the forced conjugal relations between the princesses and the sage,

particularly given the fact that the sage elicits expressions of horror and tumult in the young women when he encounters them for the first time. The portrayal of the sexual union between the princesses and the sage remains restricted to display of facial expressions and falling unconscious. Since television viewership extends to all age groups, the violence embodied in the forceful subjection of a woman to have sex with a complete stranger in order to beget sons to carry on the lineage continues to be trapped in the exigencies of what is considered decent exhibition on television. The abject humiliation of the women contained in this act is not lamented by any of the supporting characters in the epic, nor does the narrative of the televised epic dwell on it with any sense of urgency. Greater emphasis is placed on the offspring of these unions, the men who will eventually rule Aryavarta – Dhritarashtra – the blind prince – and Pandu – the weak one.

The reason the narrative of the epic, in particular the versions on television, remains one of the most appealing storylines for adaptation is the essentially perfect speed and pitch at which the epic moves. Of course, the televised forms exploit the certain drama contained in the original story to exemplify and magnify the impact of the message being conveyed to the audience. The violence germane to the narrative, as well as to the epic itself, moves further to introduce a character pivotal to the proceedings – Shakuni, the wily sorcerer-prince of Gandhar, seething with rage at the almost-forcible marriage of his dear sister Gandhari with the blind older prince of Hastinapur. Not only are Shakuni's machinations deceitful, they result in fierce and violent behaviour subsequently by his nephews. He remains a lurking presence behind the many violent events indulged in by Duryodhana and his brothers, creating situations whereby the very lives of the Pandavas are in peril. Early on in the narrative, a young Duryodhana plots the poisoning of Bheema with the help of Shakuni – a ploy which eventually fails. The most recent televised version of the *Mahabharata* presents the *prasanga* (event) in a highly dramatized manner. Shakuni, is depicted as personally preparing the poison, which he passes on to Duryodhana. An unconscious Bheema is then physically pushed into a river with the intention of causing death by drowning, an attempt on his life which he eventually survives, appearing on the screen in following episodes with a victorious expression. Forms of individual violence discernible through this particular event are attempt to murder by poisoning and drowning, both returning negative results for the perpetrators. The propensity of the protagonists of the greatest of the Hindu epics to resort to violence in varied forms and types remains one of the most intriguing factors, especially when analysed with reference to its televised forms and versions. It is notable that all of these rather minor violent episodes would lead up to the bloody and fierce fratricidal war justified by Krishna as necessitated by the tactics resorted to by the Kauravas and therefore, being a war in self-defence and above all creating conditions for the establishment of dharma *rajya* (just kingdom).

It is inevitable that a political overtone emerges as one moves further through the narrative of the *Mahabharata*. The Great War fought for the control of the throne of Hastinapur acquires the visage of state power. In fact, the episodic battles of attrition, which Duryodhana fights with his cousins, including the drowning of Bheema, are smaller steps in a series of more violent *prasangas* fructifying in a larger, more complete fight for political power. Besides the central battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the sheer evocativeness of the storyline of the epic and the grandstanding manner in which the same is narrated and represented on screen brings forth the issue of caste violence in sharp focus. The character of Eklavya remains central in this regard. Son of the *nishaad raj* or tribal king, the young Eklavya is forced to injure himself as his revered *guru* (teacher) – Dronacharya – demands *guru dakshina* (obligation paid to the teacher, usually Brahmin by the pupil, generally Brahmin or Kshatriya in return for education) in the form of the teenager's right thumb in order for him to lose his ability to use the bow and arrow with the same skill and finesse as Arjuna, his favourite pupil. The reason provided by the guru in the televised version of the epic, as in indeed the narrative of the original story, predicates the caste of the young man as a trenchant component of his objection to Eklavya attempting to better Arjuna.

Dronacharya's violent demand, in modern political terms, could be categorized as Brahmanical suppression of a young tribal man and observed in macrocosmic terms depicts the Brahmin superstructure bearing down on the subaltern. The slashing away of Eklavya's thumb, symbolic of upper caste violence and domination, remains an enduring as well as politically significant episode in the narrative, creatively

choreographed in the 2013 televised version of the epic. The Kuru princes, including Arjuna, witness the dramatic turn of events, as Guru Drona makes a rather hideous demand of the young tribal prince. Eklavya obliges his guru, as is expected of him given his place in the social order, and smilingly chops off his own thumb. The serialized epic portrays the young Arjuna being wracked with guilt and sorrow over the unjust punishment meted out to Eklavya, later mollycoddled into trusting the noble intentions behind the gory demand. On the other hand, the young Duryodhana attempts to make a politically useful move by joining hands with Eklavya in order to defeat Arjuna, reflective again of modern day politics where caste equations and resultant coalitions decide electoral outcomes.

The traditional demand for *guru dakshina* by Dronacharya results in yet another act of violence by the Kurus, this time against the king of Panchala, Dhrupad. The on-screen rendering of this episode not only represents violence but also justifies the use of it. Dronacharya's lifelong quest to avenge his humiliation at the king's court finds resonance with his pupils who want to prove their mettle as warriors of repute, the obligatory catch being that the prince who wins the battle would be crowned the heir apparent to the throne of Hastinapur. Arjuna expresses his restlessness with any delay in going into battle with Dhrupad, followed by similar indications by the Kauravas as well. Dhrupad's famed *chakravyuh* leaves the Kauravas bewildered even as Arjuna demolishes the Panchala army, also saving Duryodhana's life. The evocation of violence therefore not only exemplifies and establishes for posterity the fame of Arjuna as the greatest warriors of all time, but also becomes a stage for decision-making with regard to the heir apparent. Since Arjuna emerges and the hero of the battle, his oldest brother Yudhishthira must be crowned prince, a move vehemently opposed by Duryodhana who threatens to lead a violent rebellion, even if the state decides to go to war against him.

The utilization of violence putting several lives at risk for political decision-making remains a practice throughout the narrative of the *Mahabharata*, recreated with precision to invoke shock and awe in the viewers, at the same time justifying the use of it for the attainment of the ultimate goal – establishment of rule of law. The philosophical current running through the epic attempts to channelize the utility of violence in self-defence as practised by the Pandavas against the destructive and oppositional violence perpetuated by the Kauravas into the realm of visibility so that understanding the necessity of indulging in violence for righteous human beings such as the Pandavas could be conveyed to the viewers. Dhrupad's defeat in battle hence paves the way for yet another inglorious and violent episode – an attempt to burn the Pandavas and their mother, Kunti alive in the *lakhsha griha* (house of wax). This turn of the visual narrative towards arson and a prodigious attempt at murder has been represented by the various televised versions of the *Mahabharata* in minute detail. The 2013 televised version of the epic created the imagery of an ephemeral palace which makes use of natural light for the purposes of lighting and not, very obviously, fire. Duryodhana's murderous plan, resisted only by Kunti's firstborn, Karna, epitomizes treachery, evil and unmitigated violence – burning by fire.

It is interesting to note here that each of the pivotal episodes of the epic, televised for the benefit of discerning viewers, remains shrouded by the veneer of violence. The televised versions of the epic, thus, perform the function of representing a very fundamental binary – the distinction between violence for the establishment of dharma against violence propagated by those practicing *adharma*. Never has the binary been clearer than in the televised versions of the *Mahabharata*. It therefore emphasizes the acceptability and justification of the former and the obvious unacceptability of the latter. The iconography of violence thus remains an extension of the graphic imagery of the attire of the positive forces in opposition to the negative forces.

The violence against Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, and her public humiliation, the turning point of the narrative, is not only represented as the dishonouring of a woman, but the rape of the soul of Aryavarta. B R Chopra's *Mahabharata* recreated the epochal game of dice and the violation of Draupadi that followed in graphic terms. Subsequent renditions too have brought the bloodshot eyes of a distraught Draupadi live on television screens, thereby establishing the inevitability of war between the Pandavas and Kauravas. The molestation of Draupadi, just short of rape, remains the most debated and discussed episodes or *prasangas* of the epic, not simply for the disgust elicited by the manner in which Draupadi was treated, but because of the emasculation of her husbands. If previous episodes,

particularly those of Bheema and Duryodhana doing battle with their famed maces, and Arjuna digging in his heels against Karna's onslaught glorify the machismo of the Kshatriya warriors, the humiliation of Draupadi portrays the upholders of dharma – the Pandavas–as completely powerless individuals, their masculinity challenged by their embittered wife who hails Krishna for help having lost all hope. Draupadi's humiliation, therefore, symbolizes the debasement of the Kauravas and the decapitation of the masculinity of the Pandavas. The resultant Great War, hence is as much a war for reclaiming their masculine space as brave and virile men as it is for political domination.

The glorification of the masculinity of the Pandavas, when compared with the annihilation of their manhood at the juncture of Draupadi's humiliation could be compared with the unabashed display of the unbridled sadomasochism of the Kauravas as Duryodhana leeringly invites a shocked Draupadi to sit on his thigh, a sexually provocative gesture, as her husbands' hang their heads in shame. The evil Kuru prince, drunk on his presumptuous victory over the Pandavas in the game of dice, rigged as it is by his uncle Shakuni, bridges the gap between the dishonouring of Draupadi and the dismantling of the clan honour of the sons of Pandu. It is pertinent to note also the fact that the Pandavas, except for Bheema, are never represented by the televised versions of the *Mahabharata* as men possessing brute physical strength, which manifests quite boldly in Duryodhana and his brothers, particularly Dushasana. All television recreations seem to almost celebrate the predator-like, hulking countenance of Duryodhana. On the other hand, Arjuna's valour is only matched by the strength of his character. Much like the rather effeminate manifestation of Rama in Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* (1987–1989) transported onto the Bharatiya Janata Party's *rath yatra* in the 1990s as a muscular warrior prince, Arjuna's image remains one of masculinity defined not by physicality but by mentality.

The distinguishing character of Arjuna's violence compared to that of Duryodhana's remains the sheer difference in their physical appearance. Herein lies the third representational binary brought to fore by the careful unspooling of the several layers that shroud the narrative structure of the *Mahabharata*. Yet again, the youthful, clean-shaven, fair-skinned, white-robed Arjuna's mental astuteness, moral strength, and skill is comparable to the conspiratorial, bearded, long-haired, menacing Duryodhana's physical dominance, greed and violent nature. The import of the binary, therefore, seems to emphasize on the negativity embodied by a physically stronger Duryodhana as against the positivity of the mentally and morally stronger Arjuna. The dominant discourse informing visual cultures in India provides a ready foundation for building this binary further. Hindu nationalist ideologues such as Golwalkar and Hedgewar have repeatedly assumed the ideal Hindu male as one embodying strength of spirit and character manifested in the Hindu society and then magnified to form the Hindu Rashtra as opposed to a secular state (1966).The imagery of the demonic Muslim 'other' represented in several cinematic works as well as television series such as *Jodha Akbar* (2013–2015, Zee TV) and *Maharana Pratap* (2013–2015, Colours) remains chiefly predicated on brute physicality, further signifying overt sexuality and virility directed towards Hindu women, particularly in case of *Jodha Akbar*. On a similar plane, Duryodhana's physical strength could be conflated with the televised imagination of the Muslim where machismo becomes equated and comparable with evil.

The brutal war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas stands at the nadir of the varied forms of violence perpetrated and perpetuated by the forces of dharma and *adharma* in the *Mahabharata*, eminently represented in the televised versions of the epic, with Vasudeva Krishna's battlefield sermon to Arjuna – the *Bhagavad Gita*–occupying the central evolutionary core of the epic. As the narrative nears completion, the fallacy and futility of war and the resultant destruction becomes clear, even as Krishna rationalizes the efficacy and inevitability of the war in order for the cleansing of the society and the attainment of divine good and rule of law. The violence resorted to by the Pandavas, therefore, the war in particular remain just actions necessitated by the embodiment of evil and negativity in the sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. Krishna's influence on the progressive use of violence by the Pandavas to counter the Kauravas extends to the killing of Karna by a remorseful Arjuna. Following a prolonged and debilitating battle between the two great archers, with no definite outcome in view and the absence of an alternative to Arjuna's decisive victory in view of the importance of Karna to the Kaurava army, Krishna proposes the deceitful murder of Karna, ostensibly anathema to the proud Kshatriya race. The

first instance of the *Mahabharata* being televised, the 1988–1989 version, represented the episode, one of the key turning points of the Great War after which the victory of the Pandavas became inevitable, as the embracing of treachery in order to defeat evil. Krishna's proposal stands opposed to the fundamental tenet of a fair war –fatally attacking a defenceless man. However, Krishna's means towards the end thesis remains logically questionable. Could the Pandavas have won the war if Karna had not been slayed as he knelt down to retrieve his collapsing chariot? Assessed against modern principles of law and justice, the act could be seen as an opportunistic murder of a man unable to defend himself. The television avatar of Krishna describes the killing as simply a necessary means towards a just end. What transpired close to 36 years after the end of the Great War amongst Krishna's own clan members as they butchered each other in a march of mayhem, as delineated in the narrative of the epic brings to bear reasonable doubts on the wheel of karma that Krishna postulates as the central theme of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Furthermore, the killing of Duryodhana by Bheema too merits a mention in this regard. It is pertinent to point towards the fact that the mighty Balarama – Krishna's elder brother – disapproved of the manner in which Duryodhana was eventually brought to fall after a lengthy, tedious mace fight with Bheema, particularly due to the abrogation of yet another principle of battle between equals. *Dharma* for a Kshatriya warrior necessitates the upholding of the fundamental principles of a fair fight, which expressly includes the restriction on use of weapons only to target the upper part of the body, not at any time straying below the waist of the warrior. B R Chopra's *Mahabharata* and all the other versions that followed echoed the justification extended by Krishna on the use of the mace to break Duryodhana's thighs – in complete disregard of the Kshatriya dharma and the rules of fair play. Again, Krishna posits the 'means to an end' scenario and the exigency of bringing unfair and violent means into use for the attainment of the ultimate goal.

Public expositions of Hindu mythology, therefore, have incessantly created and upheld binaries between televised exhibitions of fair and unfair violence, the imagination of the physical appearance of good and evil, and violence perpetrated towards just and unjust ends. Little wonder then that the *Mahabharata*– a narrative steeped in violence of all kinds, types and in all forms – remains a favourite with television producers and directors for the representation of these binaries. Televising mythology perpetuates a visual culture of filming gods and therefore tends to represent unfair means, violence, and deceit as an 'act of god' and hence justified. The vilified characters, on the other hand, portray the burden of propelling the narrative further while being represented as the aggressors. Violence perpetrated by both the heroic Pandavas and the villainous Kauravas cannot be considered, as institutionalized by televised epics, on an equal plane. While the essential characteristic of violence in any form remains intact, the justification of certain acts of violence in order for the establishment of dharma continues to distinguish the narrative of the *Mahabharata* from several other instances of television entertainment.

Of significant interest is the almost complete neglect of the aftermath of the Great War, particularly with reference to B R Chopra's version of the epic. Let us consider for example Arjuna's tragic state after being confronted with the fact about Karna's birth. The first televised version of the epic provided but a passing mention to the fratricidal guilt that nearly turned him into an ascetic. In effect, the post-war episodes of the epic have been portrayed as reflections of relative quietude and peace, while the epic itself in no uncertain terms makes clear the several years of torment and sorrow that Yudhisthira underwent after having participated in an epochal disaster. The original narrative chronicles in great lengths the personal pain that he endures, further suggesting that the rest of the Pandavas and their wife suffer similar pangs of guilt.

Conclusion

Representation of violence, particularly in the Indian context and in televisual and cinematic content, remains contentious given the plethora of impact analysis studies available for review. What continues to remain missing is a wide-ranging and inclusive intervention on televisual content, especially graphic

portrayals of violence. The current analysis furthers few arguments that in whole or in part justify the research undertaking.

First, television programming has been responsible for the consolidation of certain forms of justifiable violence in society having been portrayed as necessary for the establishment for a just society in the televised form of *Mahabharata*. Such forms of violence include fratricide and wars for the control of state power. The concept of a 'just society' remains at the foreground of the epic narrative for the foundation of which the Great War is fought between cousins. The ultimate failure of the protagonists to establish such a state however does not find representation on the screen causing one to conclude that the televised version of the *Mahabharata* focused mainly on the several violent episodes that result in the war in order to appeal to the mass audience. It is assumed here that the audience would not probably find interest in the philosophy of the *Mahabharata*, but be enamoured by the visual depiction of the various events.

Second, violence remains at the forefront of the narrative of the epic, represented comprehensively on screen, effectively conveying to the mass audience the efficacy of violence as a means to an end. Several incidents of violence and crime dot the landscape of the *Mahabharata* including infanticide, attempted murder, gender and sexual violence, as well as caste discrimination and violence.

Third, the mythological epic, televised for maximum effect predominantly targeting the Hindu mass audience, although categorizing the viewers as a monolithic bloc does not represent the correct scenario. As such the impact of the epic story being broadcast on prime time television could at best be characterized as diffused. A similar conclusion could be drawn from the audience response garnered by both *Ramayana* (1987–1989) and the first televised version of the *Mahabharata*. What is unmistakable, however, is the visual resonance that the majoritarian movement sought to draw from the telecast of the *Ramayana* in their attempt at consolidating a Hindu vote bank predicated on the Ram Temple campaign in the early 1990s.

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